

Building emotional immunity

Impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on the mental health of working professionals

When the novel Corona virus bomb exploded in February-March this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced one of the strictest lockdowns on the largest population of the world. Overnight, millions of people were asked to work from home (WFH) and this was perhaps the biggest change in workplace since the Industrial Revolution.

WFH became one solution to reduce costs for organisations and keep afloat rather than shut down entirely. Organisations invested in technologies like virtual desktop infrastructure and virtual private networks (VPNs) which enabled employees to work on their devices from home.

WFH – a boon?: However, it soon became apparent that while WFH had many advantages, it also presented its own set of challenges. Many companies expected that since employees are WFH and not travelling or going out, more work will get done. However, for most households, lockdown also meant that their hired house help was not available. Home chores piled on top of office work adding to the working professional's burden. Parents of young kids were left without the support of school or day care centres. The situation was worse for women workers especially, as the burden falls disproportionately on them. As lines between personal and professional space blurred not just around the employee but also in their mind stress and anxiety levels shot up. Within a week of the lockdown, the number of reported cases of mental illness in India rose by 20 per cent, as shown in a study by the Indian Psychiatry Society.

To be perfectly clear, not being able to go to office doesn't just mean losing the physical space but the psychological space where you connect with another human being. Social interaction correlates largely with workplace engagement and lack of meaningful work relations has a negative impact on employee retention, satisfaction, and productivity. Isolation hinders formation of trust, connection, and mutual purpose.

As the lockdown continued, consumer demand remained muted and there was an overall downward trend in consumption patterns. Many professionals were faced with a financial crunch – they were asked to take pay cuts as companies tried to cut costs.

There were massive layoffs; the job market is currently in limbo with no companies looking to hire. But big-ticket expenses like EMIs, education fees, house rents and medical expenses remained fixed adding to a working professional's anxiety.



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Those who still have jobs are working under house arrest hoping that their productivity logs do not become a reason to be 'let go'. They are working under constant strain to appear 'online.' How does anyone detach from work when the fear of job loss, pay cuts and increasing debt paint a bleak picture of their future?

The other pandemic: The science is clear – working under a stressful atmosphere not only creates panic but can also lead to insomnia, hypertension, weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, etc. Researchers at Indiana University, USA have an even more dire warning – workplace stress can lead to death.

World Health Organisation (WHO) has noted that depression and anxiety can have an estimated cost of \$1 trillion per year in lost productivity. And as the pandemic (and therefore, the necessity for WFH) shows no signs of retreating we are in an urgent need of a new WFH paradigm that is less disruptive and addresses the internal and external tensions that people are facing. The World Federation of Mental Health has already appealed to governments across the world to ensure that they have a national mental health plan that includes management of mental health as a result of the pandemic.

The mental health new normal: Corporates and other working entities need to ensure that their employees are provided with adequate support to battle mental health issues. Official social media handles and mainstream media should be used to drive awareness. Therapy, certainly, needs to be made a more attractive and democratic option.

Employers need to approach interactions with empathy and compassion rather than with the pressure of job being on the line. They should strive to be transparent in conversations about life altering decisions like pay cuts and layoffs. Be non-judgmental and unbiased and encourage their employees to set boundaries and provide feedback. HR and line managers need to be cognizant if employees display symptoms of anxiety and stress like low morale, difficulty in remembering tasks or decision-making restlessness and/or irritability as well as panic attacks. On recognising any of these symptoms, they should be enabled to help the employee.

The Corona virus pandemic isn't going away any time soon. And building emotional immunity is just as important as having physical immunity. That is the only way to halt this mental health pandemic before it too gets out of control. ♦

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